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ABSTRACT

This brief description of a visit to the Dutch Open University (Netherlands) begins by noting that, although the university had been established only the previous spring, it already had over 20,000 students. It then outlines the activities undertaken by the three main operational divisions of the university, i.e., course development, education, and publishing. Topics discussed in more detail include the television and computer-assisted learning involving efforts of the Audio-Visual Department and the research and development efforts of the Education Division. (4 references) (EW)

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THE DUTCH OPEN UNIVERSITY

A report on a 2-day visit, September, 1985 -

- A.W.Bates, IET, British Open University -

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INTRODUCTION

A definition of a UNESCO expert is someone who flies over a country and writes a report. A 2-day visit is not much better. The Dutch Open University, although enrolling its first students only this spring (1985), has over 20,000 students, and is already a relatively large and complex organisation. Moreover, it is developing and changing rapidly.

This report cannot provide a full description ther of the Dutch Open University, but should be read in conjunction with other English language reports, a number of which are available on the British Open University campus in the library of the International Office (Keith Harry, ext. 3537). This report is also likely to get out of date relatively quickly, given the rate of change at the Dutch Open University.

MY VISIT

The main purpose of my visit was to give a seminar on "Selecting and Using Media in Distance Education". However, my visit was carefully planned by my Dutch hosts, so that I had time for discussions with several different departments/sections, as follows:

Department of Technical (and Computing) Sciences (Contact: Professor Kasper Boon)

Audio-Visual Department (Contact: Freek Gastkemper)

Department of Educational Sciences (Contact: Paul Kirchner)

Bureau of Research and Evaluation (Contact: Gees van Enckevort)

I also met the Head of Computing Services, responsible for computer-based publishing activities.

ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE

The three main operational divisions are:

- course development
- education (in our terms, regional services)
- publishing (operations)

COURSE DEVELOPMENT

In this division, there are seven academic departments (technical and computer sciences; science; culture, economics; social science; management; and law), plus the audio-visual department and the department of educational sciences.

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The course teams operate in a similar way to the British Open University's course teams, with representatives from both A/V and educational sciences as full course team members.

AUDIO-VISUAL MEDIA

The Audio-Visual Department has a staff of seven, due to increase to 12. Of the seven employed at the moment, six have CAL backgrounds, and one a television background. All seven sit on course teams and are responsible for developing both CAL and television materials in principle, although most of the television productions so far have been the responsibility of one person, who acts as a commissioning editor. Production of television is contracted out to NOS, the Dutch broadcasting organisation.

Television

The planning groups for the Dutch Open University played down the role of television. There is a two-year agreement with NOS to carry 40 hours of television broadcasting each year. This year, a total of 24 productions is being made. While these programmes are related to the different academic course areas, they are made to be comprehensible to a general public.

The broadcasts have three main functions:

to publicise the Dutch Open University courses to the public at large;

to provide additional study material for registered students;

to make the courses more interesting for registered students.

It can be seen then that the broadcasts do not play a central instructional role in the courses.

Copies of programmes are however made available on video-disc, for replay by students at the 18 regional centres, and development has begun on writing computer programmes to accompany one or two of the television programmes.

Computer-assisted learning

At the moment, each study centre is equipped with 10 Philips 16-bit personal computers operating on MS-DOS, currently as stand-alone machines, but with the intention next year of linking into the Dutch Open University's new mainframe computer, when installed. The machines can also be linked to the video-disc players.

When the new mainframe machine is installed, there will be three main functions for computing:

student testing

a networking facility

computer-assisted learning

However, policy is very fluid at the moment. The Technical and Computer Science Department are hoping for an agreement with Philips, which for around £500 per unit would make available for home use the new Philips MSX micro, with single disc-drive and video-disc and compact disc interface. Consideration is being given to using compact disc machines as the data storage mechanism for home computers. It was not envisaged that there would be a home communication link with the central computer, although home computers might be networked with the local study centre machines.

At the present moment, though, students have to go to study centres for computer-assisted learning, and there are few programmes available to date.

EDUCATION DIVISION

Tuition

Regional and tuition arrangements are the responsibility of the Education Division. There are 4 regions with a total of 18 regional centres throughout Holland. There are however no regional headquarters, separate from the study centres, as in the British Open University. Each region has a full-time regional co-ordinator based in one of the study centres. At each study centre there is an administrative assistant, and two technical assistants to look after the equipment, and a counsellor.

Students have tutors (20:1), based in each region, who provide face-to-face tuition in study centres. The Dutch Open University places more emphasis on study centre attendance than the British Open University.

Research and Evaluation

The Education Division is also responsible for research and evaluation within the Dutch Open University. All courses must be evaluated at the end of five years by law. The Dutch Open University devotes one and a quarter per cent of its budget to institutional research and evaluation.

Currently, there is a total of six full-time staff within the Research and Evaluation Department. There are three main areas of research planned or underway:

> course research: this includes developmental testing, and summative evaluation, using a bank of standardised questions;
>
> student research: this includes enquiries into regional and tutorial services, collection and analysis of student statistics, and studies of awareness of the Dutch Open University;
>
> student learning: this includes studies of study patterns and workloads, examinations, preparatory courses, study guides, etc.

In addition, the Dutch Open University has a number of external research contracts, on participation and interest in adult education, learning styles of Open University students, and information requirements of adult

education students.

As well as the work of full-time staff in the Research abd Evaluation Department, staff in the A/V and Educational Sciences Department in the Division of Course Development are also expected to spend between 25% and 40% of their time on research activities.

PUBLISHING

The printing of courses is highly computerised. Authors' drafts are prepared either as hard-copy or on disc using a personal computer with local word-processing facilities. The materila is then re-keyed on-line to a VAX mainframe by editors in the Publishing Division, and lay-out and printing codes are also inserted.

From the VAX disc, a working copy is produced on a Xerox X2700 laser printer. The working copy is then discussed by the course team. Editors then amend the original disc in the light of authors' corrections and alterations; page codes are added with space for diagrams or pictures to be pasted up. This provides a final copy with inserted diagrams which then goes to printers for printing.

The Dutch Open University is hoping to replace this last stage by going to photocomposing using a Penta system later next year.

SUMMARY

Although there are many problems being faced by the Dutch Open University - such as far greater enrolments than originally anticipated, I was very impressed by the keenness of the staff and the quality of the work.

The Dutch Open University is clearly an institution which we will have to treat seriously. Although it has learned a lot from the British Open University, it has developed new or alternative approaches. The Dutch staff are willing to exchange ideas and experiences, their English, like their hospitality and efficiency, is excellent, and it is cheaper to travel to and stay in Heerlen than it is to go to Edinburgh from Walton Hall. I hope therefore that my visit, although one of the first, will be the forerunner of many more.

PUBLICATIONS

I brought back the following publications (those marked with * are located in the International Office library):

GASTKEMPER, F. and van ENCKEVORT, G.(1985) The use of media in education at the Dutch Open University: Heerlen: Department of Educational Media, Dutch Open University.

GASTKEMPER, F. (1985) Seven statements on interactive video: Heerlen: Department of Educational Media, Dutch Open University.

OPEN UNIVERSITEIT (1984) Studying at the Dutch Open University (in Dutch!): Heerlen, Dutch Open University.

OPEN UNIVERSITEIT (1985) Student statistics to May, 1985: Heerlen: Dutch Open University. (in Dutch!)